



Health Facts Drug Use



What is drug addiction?

Drug addiction is a complex brain disease. It is characterized by compulsive, at times uncontrollable, drug craving and use that persist even in the face of extremely negative consequences. Drug seeking becomes compulsive, in large part as a result of the effects of prolonged drug use on brain functioning and, thus, on behavior. For many people, drug addiction becomes chronic, with relapses possible even after long periods of abstinence.

How can I understand drug abuse and addiction?

Many people view drug abuse and addiction as strictly a social problem...tending to characterize people who take drugs as morally weak or as having criminal tendencies. They believe that drug abusers and addicts should be able to stop taking drugs if they are willing to change their behavior.

These myths have not only stereotyped those with drug-related problems, but have also stereotyped their families, their communities, and the health care professionals who work with them. Addiction does begin with drug abuse when an individual makes a conscious choice to use drugs, but addiction is not just "a lot of drug use." Recent scientific research provides overwhelming evidence that not only do drugs interfere with normal brain functioning creating powerful feelings of pleasure, but they also have long-term effects on brain metabolism and activity. At some point, changes occur in the brain that can turn drug abuse into addiction, a chronic, relapsing illness. Those addicted to drugs suffer from a compulsive drug craving and usage and cannot quit by themselves. Treatment is necessary to end this compulsive behavior. Remember, drug addiction is a treatable disorder.

How quickly can I become addicted to a drug?

There is no easy answer to this. If and how quickly you might become addicted to a drug depends on many factors including the biology of your body. All drugs are potentially harmful and may have life-threatening consequences associated with their use. There are also vast differences among individuals in sensitivity to various drugs. While one person may use a drug one or many times and suffer no ill effects, another person may be particularly vulnerable and overdose with first use. There is no way of knowing in advance how someone may react.

How do I know if someone is addicted to drugs?

If a person is compulsively seeking and using a drug despite negative consequences, such as loss of job, debt, and physical problems brought on by drug abuse, or family problems, then he or she is probably addicted.

Military's Policy on Drugs

Misuse of alcohol and other drugs is on the rise in the U.S. military. Despite two decades with a zero-tolerance policy and random drug testing, the military is seeing a growing number of cases involving use of ecstasy and other designer drugs. Unlike cocaine and marijuana, the designer drugs are more difficult to detect through urinalysis. The military is experiencing an increase in cases related to ecstasy, LSD, and marijuana.

The "New" Drug

Ecstasy is an illegal drug that has effects similar to hallucinogens and stimulants. The scientific name is "MDMA" or methylenedioxymethamphetamine. Ecstasy is an illegal drug that has effects similar to hallucinogens and stimulants. That word is almost as long as the all-night dance club "raves" or "trances" where ecstasy is often used. That's why ecstasy is called a "club drug."

MDMA is synthetic. It does not come from a plant like marijuana does. MDMA is a chemical made in secret labs hidden around the country. Other chemicals or substances are often added to or substituted for MDMA in ecstasy tablets, such as caffeine, dextromethorphan (cough syrup), amphetamines, and even cocaine. Makers of ecstasy can add anything they want to the drug. So the purity of ecstasy is always in question

What are the health risks with Ecstasy?

The adverse effects of ecstasy use may include hyperthermia, liver toxicity, and neuropsychiatric effects. Severe dehydration leading to excessive fluid intake and water intoxication is also an ill effect. There can be memory deficits, confusion, depression, and sleep problems even weeks after taking this drug. Long-term use may be accompanied by long-lasting brain damage and memory impairment.

Are there effective treatments for drug addiction?

Drug addiction can be effectively treated with behavioral-based therapies and, for addiction to some drugs such as heroin or nicotine, medications. Treatment may vary for each person depending on the type of drug(s) being used and multiple courses of treatment may be needed to achieve success. Through treatment that is tailored to individual needs, patients can learn to control their condition and live normal, productive lives. Like people with diabetes or heart disease, people in treatment for drug addictions learn behavioral changes and often take medications as part of their treatment regimen. Rewarding lifestyle options must be found for people in drug recovery to prevent their return to the old environment and way of life.

For more information on this and other health and wellness topics, visit
Navy Knowledge Online (NKO) at <http://www.nko.navy.mil> or the
Navy Environmental Health Center (NEHC) at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp>.